

United States Policy in the South Pacific

by

Mr. William Bodde

Director, Office of Pacific Island Affairs

U.S. Department of State

United States participation in the establishment of the South Pacific Commission marked the beginning of the post-World War II political involvement of the United States in the South Pacific. In 1947 the wartime allies with colonies and territories in Oceania signed the Canberra Agreement which established the SPC to promote economic and social development in the islands.

The evolution of this institution reflects the political dynamics of the region. Over the years the Canberra Agreement has been amended and a body of practice has developed which makes the SPC more responsive to the island nations and territories. It is symbolic that for some years now the SPC Secretary General has been an islander. Now the recipient islands nations and territories determine the programs, priorities and allocation of the funding contributed by the members. Adapting to changing needs of the South Pacific, the SPC is engaged in such region-wide research efforts as the Skip-Jack Tuna Survey which will provide the islands with detailed knowledge of this key natural resource.

The 1952 ANZUS Treaty is another example of the American involvement in the region following the defeat of Japan. ANZUS has become a useful tool for the United States, Australia and New Zealand to discuss common concerns, assess international and regional developments and coordinate policies in the region.

In the period from the birth of the SPC and ANZUS until the present, the

region has undergone dramatic political change. Since 1962, Western Samoa, Nauru, Tonga, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu have joined the ranks of free and independent nations. They will be joined by the Gilberts (to be called Kiribati after independence) in July of this year and the New Hebrides is expected to become independent in 1980.

While these colonies and states were in the process of becoming independent, the French and American Territories in Oceania gained additional autonomy and self-government. During the same period negotiations began about the future political status of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. These political developments have taken place free of bloodshed, racial conflict, and great-power rivalry. In fact, decolonization in the South Pacific has taken place with the assistance and encouragement of the former colonial powers.

Since their independence, the island nations in Oceania have turned to regional cooperation as a means of solving common problems. For example, the South Pacific Forum was established in 1972 (among the independent and soon to be self-governing states in the region) to serve as the principal means for the South Pacific nations to discuss and coordinate regional policy. Some attempts at regional cooperation have been unsuccessful and there certainly has not always been a consensus among Forum members, but by and large the Forum has proven to be an effective political institution.

In the first two decades after the war, U.S. policy in the South Pacific was confined to the SPC, ANZUS, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (the United States became the administering power by agreement with the United Nations in 1947) and the U.S. Pacific territories--Guam and American Samoa. However, the emergence of independent South Pacific nations, a desire on the part of the U.S. territories to play a greater role in their own

destiny, political pressure in Micronesia for a new political status and the proliferation of 200 mile fisheries zones all called for changes in U.S. policy towards the South Pacific.

During this period the citizens of Guam and American Samoa began the journey down the road to self-government and now elect their own legislatures and governors. In the Trust Territory the Northern Marianas opted overwhelmingly in popular referendum to become a U.S. Commonwealth upon the termination of the U.N. Trusteeship. Last year the remaining six districts in the Trust Territory voted in a constitutional referendum; four of them approved the constitution and will become the Federated States of Micronesia, the other two voted it down and will form their own separate constitutional governments.

The United States is presently negotiating a Free Association Agreement with the three Micronesian entities which will give them control over foreign and domestic policy while the United States will retain responsibility for defense policy. We hope to sign The Agreement in the near future beginning a process which would lead to termination of the U.N. Trusteeship Agreement in 1981.

In order to adjust to these new political realities we have made institutional changes in our foreign policy establishment. A resident ambassador with an expanded staff has been assigned to Suva and also serves as the U.S. representative to the SPC. In Washington a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Department of State has been given responsibility for Oceania and a separate office has been set up for the Pacific islands. We have also begun a modest aid program for the area to supplement Australian and New Zealand efforts.

In addition to the organizational adjustments there have been other changes: increased contact with the political leaders of the region through

frequent visits, encouragement of a special role for Hawaii and the U.S. territories in relations with the region and efforts to develop a group of foreign service officers with specialized knowledge and expertise about the South Pacific.

We have also begun the process of resolving the issue of U.S. claims to twenty-six islands in the South Pacific. The United States has concluded a Treaty of Friendship with Tuvalu in which the U.S. relinquished claim to four islands. In a U.S. settlement with the Gilberts, 14 islands in the Phoenix and Line groups will become part of the new Republic of Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) shortly after the Gilberts' independence in July this year.

Although efforts to establish a South Pacific Regional Fisheries Organization with the United States as a member have not yet been successful we are still hopeful of cooperating in the future with the South Pacific nations in the creation of an international organization to conserve, manage and exploit the marine resources of the region.

We welcome and support the efforts of the State of Hawaii and the American Territories to forge closer links with the nations of the South Pacific. During the transition period we will foster closer cooperation between the Trust Territory and its South Pacific neighbors in preparation for post-Trusteeship status.

Working together with the islanders we can contribute to a peaceful, secure and developing South Pacific. The United States will continue to support regional cooperation in the South Pacific.